

West Africa polio campaign boycotted by Nigerian states

A mass poliomyelitis vaccination campaign got under way on Monday to immunise 63 million children across west Africa but was boycotted by four predominantly Muslim states in Nigeria, where leaders claim the oral vaccine causes sterility and spreads AIDS.

The west African campaign was intended as a final push to stamp out the disease in the region and is part of the World Health Organization's 15 year drive to halt transmission of the poliomyelitis virus across the world by 2005.

In a bid to convince the Nigerian state leaders that the vaccine is safe, the Nigerian government, which supports the vaccine campaign, sent clerics and politicians from five Nigerian states to visit India, Indonesia, and South Africa earlier this month.

But on their return, leaders of four of the five states still refused to cooperate with the west African vaccination campaign, saying it was a US plot to depopulate Muslim lands by causing sterility and spreading AIDS. Some said their own scientists had tested the vaccine and found it to be impure. Only officials in Kaduna state relented and allowed volunteers to vaccinate children there.

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

Only 6% of drug advertising material is supported by evidence

A new study of the advertising material and marketing brochures sent out by drug companies to GPs in Germany has shown that about 94% of the information in them has no basis in scientific evidence.

The study, carried out by the Institute for Evidence-Based Medicine, a private independent research institute in Cologne, evaluated 175 brochures containing informa-

tion on 520 drugs, which were either sent by post or handed out to 43 GPs since last June. The study was published in this month's issue of the drugs bulletin *Arznei Telegramm* (2004; 35:21-3; www.di-em.de/data/at_2004_35_21.pdf).

About 15% of the brochures did not contain any citations, while the citations listed in another 22% could not be found. In the remaining 63% the information was mostly correctly connected with the relevant research articles but did not reflect their results. Only 6% of the brochures contained statements that were scientifically supported by identifiable literature.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

Americans are told to reduce sodium and increase potassium intake

Almost all Americans and Canadians consume too much salt and not enough potassium, increasing their risk of high blood pressure, stroke, coronary artery disease, and kidney disease, a report from the US Institute of Medicine says. The report was based on a comprehensive review of the scientific literature and was sponsored by a number of US and Canadian governmental organisations and foundations.

Healthy adults aged between 19 and 50 years should consume 1.5 g of sodium (equivalent to 3.8 g of salt) a day to replace losses through perspiration and should not exceed 2.3 g (5.8 g of salt), the report said. But more than 95% of American men, 90% of Canadian men, 75% of American women, and 50% of Canadian women regularly consume more than the recommended upper limit.

Furthermore, Americans and Canadians are consuming only about half the recommended daily amount of potassium: 4.7 g. Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Dietary Reference Intakes for Water, Potassium, Sodium, Chloride, and Sulfate is available at www.nap.edu

Netherlands to crack down on complementary medicine

Tony Sheldon *Utrecht*

The Netherlands is considering tougher laws on practitioners of complementary medicine after government health inspectors who were investigating the death from breast cancer in 2001 of the actress and comedienne Sylvia Millecam severely criticised her treatment.

The investigators found that alternative practitioners contradicted the diagnosis of breast cancer made by her doctors and offered her instead the prospect of a cure with "unfounded methods of treatment."

The report concluded that "various individual carers" had "offered such irresponsible care" that disciplinary action or criminal proceedings are likely. Their role prevented a cure or an extension of Ms Millecam's life, and she died from untreated breast cancer.

The Dutch Healthcare Inspectorate attacked the country's current "liberal regime" for not "sufficiently guaranteeing the protection of the citizen against malpractice by alternative carers" and called for measures to improve protection against "dangerous quackery."

Although relatives had lodged no complaint, the inspectorate launched an investigation in 2002 after persistent media reports saying that Ms Millecam had been a "desperate" cancer patient who "forfeited the chance of a cure."

The investigators' report found that between September 1999 and her death nearly two years later, when she was aged 45, Ms Millecam was treated by 28 different practitioners and institutions. Though mainstream care was available she exclusively chose alternative treatments.

Her general practitioner had first identified a lump of 1 cm radius in her breast. She was referred to a hospital radiology department, but the tests were inconclusive. She was referred to a surgeon, but instead she chose a doctor who practised alternative electro-acupuncture. She was assured that nothing was the matter.

The next May breast cancer was diagnosed, and surgery was recommended. Instead she saw a popular faith healer who said

she did not have cancer and advised against chemotherapy. She then began regular visits for "healings." Over the next year she sought various cures, including "cell specific cancer treatment" at a Swiss clinic and "salt therapy," and visited a psychic healer. She was told on at least two occasions that she did not have cancer but a bacterial infection.

The inspectorate has reported six alternative practitioners to the public prosecution service. It has also confirmed that three doctors are being investigated for possible disciplinary action, including two of the six practitioners.

The inspectorate now wants the law changed to ensure greater supervision of alternative practitioners and that all such practitioners have to be registered. It also wants it made illegal for anyone other than a trained doctor to be allowed to make a medical diagnosis.

The Royal Dutch Medical Association supports the proposals. A spokeswoman said that regulations that applied to alternative healers in the 1997 law covering professional practice in individual health care had been relaxed. The Millecam case was just one of several that cast doubt on whether this relaxation was justified, she argued. □



Sylvia Millecam died of breast cancer after having electro-acupuncture, faith healing, salt therapy, and psychic healing